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SUBJECT: VIETNAM - AVIAN FLU: RECENT MEETINGS

REF: Hanoi 875 and previous

11. (SBU) Summary: This week new information emerged about Avian Influenza H5N1 (AI) in meetings with CDC Influenza Epidemiologist Keiji Fukuda, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, and the Donor Group. Experts now believe that the virus may be changing in the north of Vietnam, but do not yet have laboratory confirmation of this change. The Government response and acknowledgement of the problem seems to have improved significantly. The Vietnam Mission shares the view of WHO and FAO that the next six months will be critical to Vietnam's efforts to devise and implement an effective strategy to control AI in poultry and prevent a more serious outbreak in humans. Post recommends that the USG speed up its consideration of a positive response to WHO and FAO's call for donor assistance. End Summary.

12. New information emerged at three meetings this week in Hanoi on Avian Influenza (AI). On April 25, the Ambassador, USAID Country Manager and Consul attended a meeting of the "donor group," hosted by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) with briefings by World Health Organization (WHO) and United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) officials. The meeting focused on coordinating international assistance for AI response. One of a team of influenza experts from Australia, New Zealand and the United States, Influenza Epidemiology Unit Leader at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Dr. Keiji Fukuda briefed the DCM and Health Attache separately. Finally, on April 26, the DCM, Health Attache and Agricultural Attache met with the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD).

Vietnam's Response

13. (SBU) An important development is that the Government, at every level, now openly acknowledges that AI is a major problem. AI is now included in regular briefings to the Prime Minister, according to FAO. There is still a tendency to focus on economic costs while downplaying the social health threat. But since Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) Nguyen Tan Dung publicly estimated that AI has shaved a half point off this year's annual GDP growth rate, political attention to the issue has been more readily forthcoming and seems to be energizing discussions of response strategies. While DPM Dung has asserted publicly that the situation is contained, he had acknowledged privately to WHO and FAO representatives that that is not true. Moreover, he and other senior officials appear to recognize the clear consequences of not taking action.

14. (SBU) Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) Cao Duc Phat called for urgent action and assistance in meetings with the DCM as well as with WHO and FAO officials. To remove the threat of a human AI pandemic, Vietnam must change its poultry industry, improve veterinary services at the grassroots level and strengthen its capacity to remove the virus, he stressed. The Ministry is implementing all three activities. To do so, the Ministry must strengthen surveillance to know where the virus is and its characteristics. Minister Phat requested international assistance to strengthen surveillance and diagnostic laboratory capability. He asked for the immediate assistance of laboratory experts for virus isolation and characterization and for developing a suitable surveillance program.

15. (U) MARD has a plan to compensate farmers, which it calls a "farmer support plan." The Government is uncomfortable with the term "compensation" because it implies 100 percent compensation. The "farmer support plan" has recently been augmented to provide 50 percent reimbursement for poultry culled. To be effective, FAO Country Representative Anton Rychner states that reimbursement must be at least 75-80 percent, but even 100 percent reimbursement will not be fully effective. Rychner

believes it may be difficult to translate this to action since MARD is a weak Ministry especially at the provincial and local levels. For drastic action to take place in the provinces, be it in the culling of poultry stocks or other significant initiatives, clear direction must come from senior political leadership in Hanoi, Rychner stressed.

16. (SBU) The WHO, FAO, and UNDP and Fukuda agree that the GVN needs to define and prioritize its needs and focus on developing response plans. Fukuda and the WHO both note that the Ministry of Health (MOH) seems to be more fully engaging recently and are hopeful that the MOH will be more responsive in the coming weeks. The MOH has improved its information sharing on human cases and research, but its contributions to the plan for coordinated response and assistance developed jointly by FAO, WHO and the GVN (Hanoi 875) are still minimal and slow. The MOH has yet to identify its overall priorities for resources relative to AI. MOH's National Institute of Hygiene and Epidemiology (NIHE) seems more prepared and responsive. NIHE Director Dr. Nguyen Tran Hien has outlined priorities and has made requests to the Department of Health and Human Services to meet NIHE's needs. The result is that the current plan is reasonably informative on the poultry and agricultural steps that MARD plans, but does not address the health side. Dr. Fukuda reported that his discussions appear to have convinced MOH hardliners that the situation needs rapid and sustained attention, but that communication between the MOH and MARD at the technical level remains weak.

17. (SBU) WHO Country Representative Hans Troedsson noted that the lack of a Pandemic Emergency Response Plan is critical. He explained that should a human pandemic occur, there would be a one to two week window of opportunity, when the number of cases would jump from tens to hundreds of cases, in which it might be possible to halt further spread of the pandemic. Beyond this window, once the number of cases gets into the thousands and spreads geographically, the pandemic will be out of control and cannot be contained. He stressed the need for the GVN to develop a plan that can be quickly enacted in this brief window of opportunity, to limit travel, public movement and public exposure in order to contain a pandemic.

18. (U) The WHO experts noted the risk that the Government's attention may dwindle as the weather warms and the number of new human cases and poultry outbreaks drops. The lack of new cases would be purely a seasonal trend. The virus is fully entrenched in Vietnam and the threat of pandemic is not gone. WHO asked all governments to raise the issue at high-level visits and meetings and to urge the GVN to maintain momentum and focus on the issue.

Possible Change in Virus -----

10. (SBU) Fukuda and the team of international experts believe that they are seeing a change in the virus in the north of Vietnam, but this has not yet been proven in laboratory tests and is purely theoretical at this point. They point to various factors including: a divergence in epidemiology between the north and south of Vietnam, a change in the age groups affected, a widening of the age range among those infected (in the north three children under the age of one were infected), a decreased fatality rate, a widening range of symptoms reported, an increased number of mild or non-symptomatic cases, an increased number of clusters in the north, a widening gap in the time to onset of disease between cases in clusters, and the fact that the disease is lasting longer this year. There may be other explanations, such as improved surveillance and reporting, but taken together, Fukuda and his team believe these factors may indicate that the virus has changed in the north. WHO concurs with this assessment and now believes the cases surrounding the Thai Binh cluster may indeed be considered to be a fourth outbreak in humans. (Note: By this definition, the first outbreak was from December 2003 to March 2004. The second occurred in July 2004. The third began in December 2004 in the south of Vietnam and has not yet concluded. End Note.)

11. (U) Based on Fukuda and his team's observations, WHO will arrange a second, more comprehensive assessment of the data by international influenza experts, including epidemiologists and virologists in Manila. The meeting is tentatively scheduled for the week of May 2 and there are plans to include representatives from Cambodia and Thailand.

12. (SBU) If this change in the virus proves to be true, it could mean an increased risk of a human pandemic. The increased numbers of clusters may indicate improved transmissibility. The decreased fatality rate and increased number of mild or non-symptomatic cases may reduce detection and containment. Finally, the changes now being detected could be the first of more dramatic changes to come. According to WHO's Hans Troedsson, if the virus has indeed

changed in the northern Vietnam, then that region is at highest risk to be the source and epicenter of any global pandemic.

13. (U) In an alternate explanation for the longer lasting season this year, World Bank Representative Laurent Msellati pointed out that seasonality may not simply be tied to the weather and the environment. There are market seasons, holiday seasons, and even economic trends that may come and go just as the seasons do.

Other Information on the Disease

14. (SBU) Fukuda provided some additional information. For example, of the confirmed cases, 70 percent have known contact with birds but 30 percent have not had contact with birds; this pattern does not have seemed to have changed since last year. Further, based on conversations with physicians at Bach Mai Hospital, which has seen approximately 40 AI patients, they appear to be harder to treat successfully than SARS patients. Also, the physicians note that antivirals (such as Oseltamivir) are not the panacea. The consultation team asked the Bach Mai team to organize their data as soon as possible. Finally, the mortality difference between ducks and chickens - infected chickens are dying rapidly while infected ducks appear asymptomatic - is disconcerting. Ducks can spread AI virus more widely into the environment over a long period of time.

15. (SBU) Minister Phat told the DCM that, based on serology and virus isolation, there appears to be a change in the pattern of the disease in poultry, which international experts need to reassess. Observed changes include a drop in the mortality rate in chickens from more than a 99 percent in 2004 to identifying living, but infected chickens in 2005 and, in ducks, changes include asymptomatic, but infected birds, and a change in the serologic pattern. Phat suggested the observations might be real or also an artifact of sampling errors and laboratory limitations.

Vaccination

16. (U) Poultry Vaccine: It is unclear whether the GVN has decided to begin officially a poultry vaccination campaign. On April 26, MARD reported that Vietnam had not decided yet on an official policy. However, the World Bank's Msellati said that MARD requested financial assistance for an official vaccination campaign on April 22. Minister Phat noted that MARD is still testing vaccine effectiveness, but would like to begin vaccinating before next winter. He said that they would be using imported vaccines because Vietnam's capacity to develop a vaccine is limited. He requested the assistance of U.S. animal vaccine experts to work with MARD to help in planning for roll out of their vaccination program.

17. (U) Human Vaccine: WHO's Troedsson reported that U.S. development of a human vaccine is proceeding well. If there are no glitches, it should be approved for use by the end of this year. Production capacity and a delivery schedule were not discussed. He expressed concern that the GVN does not have a plan for who will receive the vaccine or how to distribute it. Vietnam is also developing a human vaccine, but its development is slower and Vietnam does not have sufficient capacity for mass production.

18. (SBU) Comment: The Vietnam Mission shares the view of WHO and FAO that the next six months will be critical to Vietnam's efforts to devise and implement an effective strategy to control AI in poultry and prevent a more serious outbreak in humans. Post recommends that the USG speed up its consideration of a positive response to WHO and FAO's call for donor assistance. End Comment.

MARINE